

## **”THE SWALLOWS ARRIVE HERE FROM ARGENTINA” SÁNDOR MÁRAI’S LAST DECADE IN SAN DIEGO**

**Tibor KOSZTOLÁNCZY<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study is to examine the last decade of Sándor Márai’s life in San Diego in the 1980s. Márai and his wife, Ilona Matzner regarded the city as a safe haven, San Diego was the last station of their wandering through continents. I try to analyze the causes why Márai became disappointed in Europeanness, and what he thought of the fate of East-Central Europe. The seclusion on the shores of the Pacific Ocean helped Márai to forget painful memories, heal his soul, cover the fiascos of his literary career too. Moreover, Márai as an artist found inspiring the ethnically mixed neighbourhoods of San Diego, his last novel took place in the area of the Mexican–American border.

### **KEYWORDS**

Sándor Márai, Radio Free Europe, East-Central Europe, Soviet block, assimilation, ethnic diversity, hot line, San Diego

### **DISAPPOINTMENT**

Sándor Márai mentioned friendly, sprawling San Diego in a moving manner in his diary many times between 1978 and 1988. He regarded San Diego as a haven for himself and for his wife after long decades of wandering.

Márai and his wife, Lola Matzner, with their adopted son, János, emigrated from Hungary in 1948. After spending a couple of months in Switzerland, they established a home on the Posillipo Hill (Naples, Italy). The Márais left Italy for the United States in 1952 for the first time, and settled down in New York City. Sándor Márai’s first impressions were rather controversial, since he could not realize his plans of publishing novels in English. His prose appeared old-fashioned and strange to the American editors, yet he had no other qualifications to make a living. He accepted the offer coming from Radio Free Europe, and started to write commentaries which were broadcast every week. Being a journalist at Radio Free Europe created the illusion of not only being useful but involved in policy making too. [1, p. 94–105, 269–289] [8] Márai invested a lot of energy into writing under the pseudo name Ulysses, however, the Western world’s passivity regarding the 1956 Hungarian revolution disappointed him deeply. [6, p. 328] In May 1967, he recorded the last broadcast for the Radio: ”I do not want to be engaged in this task anymore. It was an important assignment with an exciting and painful beginning. Then it became an inane, vulgar industry. I have had enough; it lasted much longer than was necessary.” [4, p. 34]

In the meantime, Márai and his family members became American citizens. Márai and his wife returned to Italy in 1967, and lived in Salerno (Campania) for thirteen years. The American pension enabled them to have a stable livelihood as well making longer journeys to different countries. In the second half of the 1970s, Márai feared that Italy would be entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Tibor Kosztolánczy habil, PhD, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest. ktibor333@gmail.com

destabilized by the political extremists. [6, p. 28] Finally, in May 1980, they left for the States for the second time. Both of them had good impressions of San Diego, the city they had visited before, and after a couple of months of staying in hotels, they rented a flat in 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue at Balboa Park in the city centre.

### East and West

In San Diego, Márai did not feel the urge to express his opinion on current affairs: "On the shores of the Pacific, I live so far from anyone or anything that had been in my life, as if I was a Trappist monk who could think back on the events of his secular life. I do not long for anyone or anything from my past, and I cannot be angry at anyone or anything. But I am still interested in the very moment." [7, p. 26] San Diego was far away from the quarrelling circles of Hungarian emigrants of Western Europe as well the East Coast of the US where a person's status was determined by religion, political views, and party sympathies. Márai stated contently that "There is no other way to live a dignified life solely in solitude." [7, p. 119]

He criticized, yet accepted, the inconsistency of the large-scale politics of the West admitting that it was the lesser evil compared to the far-left and leftist ideologies and practice. For example, when Márai saw the events of the 1984 National Convention of the Republican Party on television, the yelling, screaming, flag-waving mass of delegates reminded him of a drunk and doped hippie festival. (Márai could not think of anything more disgusting than a pop festival.) Nevertheless, he understood that re-electing Ronald Reagan would be a historic event. According to Márai, Reagan was committed to confine communism, and that made acceptable the morally challenging aspects of the US administration too. [7, p. 235–236]

All in all, in the 1980s, Márai showed little interest in analysing the developments of global politics. He usually repeated the well-known features and characteristics of totalitarian regimes over-simplifying rather complex situations many times. [7, p. 106, 109]

In contrast to this, in the 1970s, Márai found it inspiring to decipher the messages of the *détente*. For example, he took it as a challenge to find out what happened behind the scenes before Alexander Solzhenitsyn was finally deported from the Soviet Union to West Germany in 1974. Márai followed the events wondering whether Solzhenitsyn was a victim, a martyr, or an *agent provocateur*. Finally, Márai came to the conclusion that releasing Solzhenitsyn from the Soviet Union was a sign of a temporary victory by the anti-Stalinists against the hardliners in Moscow. The case was a just a "show" conveying the message that the Soviet Union was ready to reduce tensions between East and West. [5, p. 15, 30, 33–34, 36–37, 167–168]

Márai recognized the symptoms of the growing crises in the Soviet bloc in the 1980s, yet he was not able to find out the exact meaning of the sporadic events. When Wojciech Jaruzelski proclaimed martial law in Poland in December 1981, Márai thought that the military officers would "punish" the privileged communists, who were responsible for the economic bankruptcy. [7 p. 10] That was a fallacy.

Márai continued reading prestigious American magazines (Foreign Affairs, National Geographic, U. S. News & World Reports) in the 80s, but he must have lacked the semi-official information sources he had access to when working for Radio Free Europe. He did not write about the power struggle nor the political platforms of the Kremlin, he only had presumptions of the existing conflicts between the East-Central European countries. It was difficult to find relevant explanations of the East-Central outcomes in the 1980s even if the analyst lived in the Eastern bloc.

By the 1980s, Márai had spent more than three decades in exile lacking proper information on Hungarian issues. He did not believe a single word from the news of Magyar Hírek (the propaganda magazine printed in Budapest). His relatives commented on the current Hungarian affairs extremely cautiously in their letters, his very few correspondents living in Western countries were not able to provide him with detailed information about the changing

situation of the 1970s and 1980s, since those friends left Hungary decades ago too. [11, p. 91–135] [2]

Márai noted in his diary, that according to his acquaintances, who visited the *old country* behind the iron curtain in the mid 1970s, the Hungarians tended to concentrate solely on material gain, personal prosperity and comfort. They had become indifferent to politics and ideology. Márai drew the conclusion that these signs indicated a dangerous tendency, a kind of lethargic state of mind. [5, p. 306–307] A historian, or even a witness who lived in Hungary in the 1970s, could correct Márai's evaluation in many aspects: not all the people lost faith in Hungarian communism called socialism, however, many of the Hungarians had never believed in communism at all. Some people started to pretend to have faith in communism so that they would be promoted at their working places, and many of the young showed growing interest in Western writers, philosophers, and pop musicians from the mid 1960s (for the latter Márai could not find words pejorative enough).

Márai knew that the relatively higher living standard in Hungary was based on foreign loans. He regarded this policy as a complete failure from the Western point of view, since he was convinced that financing an ill-fated economy would only prolong its agony. [7, p. 99–100, 191] Márai probably did not realize that these loans were not pointless at all. On the contrary, these enormous amounts of money had to be repaid along with interest at the end of a certain period. As part of a long-term strategy, these loans led to the financial breakdown of the East-Central European economies.

Márai conjured up obscure and somehow confusing ideas about how communism would end. He envisioned romantic storms sweeping over the mountains and fields from the Baltic states to the Adriatic Sea [7, p. 107] Other times, he thought that revolutions follow a more or less universal pattern: officers would seize control in a military *coup d'état* in the last phase of the political war. [7, p. 12–13] (Neither Márai nor anyone knew what would happen next.) The most plausible concept he made up was based on the growing tensions between the nations, which had been united in the Soviet bloc by force. Márai understood clearly that the non-Russian nations resisted assimilation, and he assumed that tensions would generate devastating energy. Fortunately, this speculation has not come true, however local ethnic wars broke out in certain areas of the Soviet Union (e. g. in the Caucasus) and in the Balkans in the 1990s. [7, p. 111]

### **The Other Person**

Márai started his diary in 1943, the year he was at the peak of his popularity and success. In the next years, this world fell apart: he suspended publishing due to the German occupation of Hungary in 1944. He lost his audience and readers, the house where he lived in Miko street of Buda was bombed. He started to publish again after the war, but he rarely discussed sensitive political issues before the public. He then escaped from the Stalinist dictatorship in 1948. "Half of my life remained there. The second round started, wandering through continents. The man that I was, died forty years ago. And the other one, whom I have become by now, was born. Though, this latter one is also falling apart", he wrote in 1984. [7, p. 211] Márai's diary documented how the "other person" fought for acceptance in exile, as well as how he found his new readers without losing artistic independence.

Besides personal notes, the diary meant a kind of substitute for journalism for the emigrant. [7, p. 251] From the early 1920s until 1943, Márai published at least two original articles every week. [10] During the decades of emigration, he contributed to foreign newspapers only occasionally, not as a regular writer. His weekly broadcast on the waves of Radio Free Europe put an enormous psychological burden on him. So he shortened his "regular" articles, and adapted them to the form of a diary. The notes one after the other belong to different invisible, though recognizable "columns": *Politics (Transatlantic Relations, European Affairs,*

*Soviet Block*), *Economy*, *History*, *Lifestyle*, *Books*, *Social Life*, *Health*, *Obituaries*, *Travel*, *Weather*. He had a homemade catalogue of his most important issues, and often looked up and checked what he had written about the same topic previously. [3, p. 203] [6, p. 144]

The content of *Politics* in the 1980s (as we have seen above) is slightly disappointing, these notes do not show Márai as an analyst at his best. He did not depict a coherent picture about European affairs, his short essays on politics are not convincing. San Diego was far from the transatlantic region, indeed. But the ultimate reason for this decline was that, as a matter of fact, Márai became disappointed in *all* political ideologies and lost belief in progress in the late 1970s. [6, p. 31, 38]

Living in Italy in the 1970s, Márai and his wife were convinced that the country was on the verge of the outbreak of civil war. Their acquaintances thought that the far leftist terrorist groups were supported by the Soviet Union, and the final outcome would be a communist takeover. [6, p. 183, 206] Márai had a low opinion of Western Europe as a political power. [6, p. 48–49, 171] When the political leaders of the West signed the Helsinki Declaration in 1975, he looked on the action as betraying the East-Central European countries. Márai observed with dismay that the West accepted the geographic expansion of the Soviet regime, and approved further expansion in other areas. [5, p. 240]

### **The Pacific**

In December 1977, Márai and his wife embarked on a six week long journey to California. They spent half of the time in San Diego. Márai was hypnotized by the appearance of the Pacific Ocean: "Here, the sky is wider, brighter, and boundless. It blankets the Pacific, a phenomenon, which cannot be measured in a European sense. Another world begins here. I stop walking, and I take deep breaths as if a window was opened. What I see is the Emptiness, and at the same time, the Entirety. This is the other world, but it cannot be mine. The familiar European and American, continental values are not relevant here anymore." [6, p. 12]

San Diego and the Ocean helped Márai forget painful memories, heal his soul, cover the fiascos of the past decades: "Europe, New York, youth, manhood, all the memories, as well 'history', 'literature' is getting too pale, everything has been left far away." [6, p. 26]

They returned to Salerno in early spring 1978, and revisited California the next year. The constant strikes in Italy, the unreliability of communal services prevented them from living a normal life. Moreover, they lacked security and the high-standard American health services as well. Márai and his wife decided to leave Europe and settle down in San Diego. Before their last journey, *leaving* Europe was somehow more important than *arriving* somewhere else. Márai wanted to find a secluded place for themselves far away enough from the troubled European political situation.

San Diego proved to be a good choice. It appeared as a shelter bound by the Mexican border in the South, the mountains and the desert in the East, and a huge military base in the North. The Márais felt that they had reached a safe harbour which would help them regain being secure. They did not have friends nor colleagues in San Diego, but walked a lot in the streets of the city and visited neighbouring areas. Márai sensed from the very beginning that San Diego (and California) is not a replica of the metropolitan area of the East Coast but an independent socio-cultural entity. He described San Diego as a gateway for emigrants coming from Mexico, and a watchtower looking to the Far East. He documented many signs of the ethnic diversity, and forecast the big waves of migration of the 2010s, indeed. [6, p. 13, 19, 25, 82, 102] [7, p. 37–38]

The notes about Europe in his diary were replaced by comments on the Pacific region and Latin America. Márai started to read books about the pre-Columbian civilizations and found it inspiring that certain legal and moral norms, which are natural in Europe, do not appear inevitable in other civilizations. His last novel called *True Love* took place in the area of the

Mexican border. Many remarks from his diary were inserted into the text; the Hungarian title, *Szívszerelem* sounds ironic alluding to the human sacrifice in the Aztec culture as well. The novel was finished in 1985 but first released in 2001. [9]

### Hot Line

From the spring of 1985, Lola Márai's illness began to worsen, Sándor Márai took care of her at home. He complained of constant tiredness in his diary sensing "the imminence of death". [7, p. 269, 278] The genre of his diary went through noticeable changes. Comments on public life occurred less frequently, the text became personal. Márai started to confess the miserable physical and mental state they were suffering from.

Texts do not tell us what happened "in reality". Although, we *feel* that Márai talked straightforwardly about himself in the last three years of his diary between 1986 and 1988. The form of the reflections were not as well constructed as before, many of them were confined to listing the events of the passing days. The presumable intention was not leaving the work, which lasted for more than forty years, incomplete. Nevertheless, we can find marvellously well-written, impressive pages to the very last.

One day in autumn 1985, Márai realized that he could not communicate with Lola anymore. His wife was taken to hospital with a terminal illness. The writer recognized that he had lost his most important listener. He read out everything first to Lola for sixty years: "There is no one left to read for. Expressing myself in writing does not interest me anymore. When she goes, I will go after her silently, without drama." [7, p. 299] The philosophical explanations did not seem to be valid anymore: "Last night, I tried to read Spinoza's *Ethic*, I put it aside feeling nauseous. Words, words, the lot of it. Reality is wordless." [7, p. 295]

Lola Márai died in January 1986. After her death, alternating phases of anger and rage, insensitivity, and distress dominated Sándor Márai's days. The conclusions in his diary are often reduced to one word, the most frequent adjectives relating to life are *inexplicable*, *terrific*, *abhorrent*, *absurd*, *grotesque*. Another tragedy happened in April 1987. Márai's adopted son, János died suddenly. Márai reached a state of utter denial: "God, mercy, grace. All the things, priests, philosophers said. Everything is a lie. There is no 'point', no 'meaning'. There are only merciless facts." [7, p. 361]

At the same time, something happened to Márai to ease the pain. At nights, he "received" messages from Lola. This unique experience created some kind of perspective for him, the content emerging from subconscious made his life bearable. He registered the first messages approximately five weeks after Lola's death: "I dream – not 'with her' but with her voice, with her aura that is left here. Like the *hot line* connecting Moscow and Washington – it is not a voice speaking, yet some kind of writing conveys the message through the *hot line*, I see the moving letters in my dream. Sometimes it is only a word. [...] Then: 'Are you here?' (This is the way she called me when she could not see and hear any longer.) I answer in my dream: 'I am here'." [7, p. 321–322]

At the beginning, it was evident for Márai that the experience of the *hot line* was a kind of hallucination. Later he did not exclude the possibility the dead could communicate with the living this "modern" way. In March 1986, the *hot line* mentioned that Lola also kept a personal diary for decades. Márai found Lola's exercise books, and started to live over their memories again: "This is a present from her, from the great beyond. As if I got a 'letter' from her every day." [7, p. 336] In May 1986, Márai started to hear acoustic messages: "The voice speaks long, sounds like music and smells like flowers. It cannot stop. I listen to it in a dark room, I fear that it gets stuck or something prevents it from telling 'everything'." [7, p. 339]

Márai spoke about the hidden territory, the subconscious in a suggestive, natural manner. He could make us believe that he had not gone crazy, that the whole experience was real. Nevertheless, the *hot line* is a perfect metaphor. As it maintained communication between

East and West during the decades of Cold War, it created contact between the living and the dead. On the other hand, the *hot line* revealed an inherent quality of Márai's personality: he considered the communication between world powers as fragile as it could have been between life and death.

### **Before a Long Journey**

Experiencing the agony of his wife's illness, Márai decided that he would not wait until becoming unable to act. He bought a semi-automatic pistol and put it into the drawer of the night table. One night the *hot line* explained him how to commit suicide properly. He returned to the weapons store and the assistant advised him of the correct way of using a gun. Not being sure of the technical details entirely, Márai signed up for a firearm training course in a suburb of San Diego at the age of 86. After the first lesson, he arrived home late: "I slept well like someone who had arranged everything necessary at the ticket office before a long journey." [7, p. 345, 323, 326, 338–339]

On the February 21, 1989, Sándor Márai called 911 from 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue 2820. He left the entrance door open, and shot himself in the head.

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